

Information About Colonial Life

Native Americans Teaching and Helping Colonists

Here Roger Williams, a clergyman who supported freedom of thought and land rights for Native Americans, is welcomed by friendly Native Americans who sheltered him for the winter. In 1636 the town of Salem, Massachusetts, threatened to arrest him for his ideas. Many colonists who came into contact with the Native Americans preferred their lifestyle and had to be forced to return to the colonies.

Many tribes helped colonists adjust to the strange new world without altering their own customs. Without such help, many colonists would have starved and died. The Native Americans had grown corn for thousands of years and introduced it to the colonists, as well as methods for cultivating it and cooking it. Corn hominy, pone, and succotash became the food in every colonial home. Native Americans taught the colonists how to trap fish and find wild herbs and greens. Settlers used Native American paths and developed them into roads. Tribespeople introduced colonists to snowshoes, ways of converting fur pelts into warm winter clothing, and making canoes and moccasins.

Discussion Question: In what ways did Native Americans help the colonists?

Native Americans and Colonists in Conflict over the Land

Initially, many of the colonies made efforts to maintain good relations and to share goods with the Native Americans. In early settlements whites went through the motions of buying land from the Native Americans. But the Native Americans rarely understood, since their attitude toward land was much different. “How can you sell the land?” asked Chief Seattle a century later. “How can you sell the air? The sky?”

Here William Penn, the founder of Pennsylvania, makes a treaty with the Lenni Lenape tribe. Both he and James Oglethorpe, founder of Georgia, attempted to build communities where colonists bought the land from Native Americans and treated them equally. However, relations deteriorated when settlers began taking the land without paying. To many settlers the land was free for taking, but over 600 Native American nations existed and used this land. Tribes responded in different ways to the white settlers’ advances. Some, such as the Pequots and Powhatans, resisted and were destroyed. The Iroquois League negotiated with competing settlers and lasted longer than most tribes.

What the Native Americans gained from whites—disease, tools, guns, and alcohol—shattered their previous way of life. Few tribes adopted European lifestyles. Those who did were rarely accepted into the community except as second-class citizens.

Discussion Question: Why did the arrival of Europeans in America have a negative impact on Native Americans?

Enslaved People and Their Treatment

Whether free or enslaved, African Americans in the colonies experienced much hardship throughout their lifetimes. The first Africans brought to the colonies worked as indentured servants: slaves who served a five- to seven-year term for their food, clothing, shelter. Then they were released as free citizens. But as the tobacco, rice, and indigo business boomed, southern planters saw how much money they could save by keeping African Americans as slaves. Many whites already regarded Africans as inferior and slavery as natural. And as the slave population grew larger than the white population in many southern colonies, whites grew anxious and developed restrictive laws. By 1775 African Americans represented one fifth of the colonial population, yet in most colonies they could not marry, sue in court, carry weapons, or stay out after curfew. In South Carolina, a slave who hit a white person could be punished with whipping, branding, or death. It was rare for owners to teach their slaves to read or write.

Slaves were considered the “chattel” or property of their masters. They could be bought and sold, separated from their families, and hired out to other people according to their owner’s will. Slaves, especially in southern fields, generally worked 12 to 14 hours a day, sometimes till death. A more comfortable life was available for a house slave who might cook and clean for the master or mistress. In New England many slaves were such indoor servants, living and eating separately from the family. Slaves who rebelled had little chance against white militias that sentenced them to hanging and impaled their heads on poles. Slaves resisted individually as well, by avoiding chores, escaping, or killing their masters.

African Americans were forced to mix their origins, traditions and languages as their families were broken up and sold across the colonies. White communities from different parts of Europe tended to stay more separate until trade and politics brought them closer.

Discussion Question: How were African Americans treated in colonial America?

Quilting Bees

Colonial women's lives were filled with hard work and not much time for leisure. To make work more fun and artistic, neighboring women gathered to design large quilts during parties called quilting bees. These sometimes lasted for days. There women demonstrated their skill in needlework and their thriftiness. They saved all their cloth pieces from clothes they made for the next quilting bee.

Making the quilts involved much labor. Women carefully cut the cloth to patterns made of tin, cardboard, or paper and pieced them together with thousands of stitches. Then they sewed the quilt to a lining with layers of wool or cotton in between, and mounted it on four bars of wood, called the "quiltin'-frame." Now a dozen quilters could sit and stitch designs across the quilt at the same time. Women named their beautiful patterns "Rising Sun," "Dove in the Window," or "Job's Trouble." A daughter might come to the quilting bee and try her hand, but the large quilts were reserved for the mothers with longer arms and stronger muscles. One famous quilt brought the silk pieces from a wedding dress together and graced the bed of George Washington when he returned home a war hero. Today these quilts are considered works of art and hang in museums.

Discussion Question: What were quilting bees and why did they exist?

Marriage

Marriage rituals differed throughout the colonies, but almost everyone married. People were expected to marry so they might contribute to the economic growth of the community.

Quaker marriages differed from those in every other group and resembled Native American marriages in that couples married themselves, without ministers, exchanging vows they had created themselves. Settlers on the frontier, often too far from preachers, adopted similar customs. In the southern colonies, couples were married at home by the rites of the Anglican Church of England, with the whole neighborhood attending. Card playing, dancing, and supper would follow. If a couple lived together without marrying or if the community did not think the marriage respectable, the couple could be fined or broken apart. Marriage was for life. A few divorces and separations were granted by the courts only on grounds of adultery. Many colonists arranged their own separations, alimony, or divorces.

Common law in many of the colonies made the husband master of his household. He had almost total control of his wife's property. Many women arranged pre-marriage contracts with their future husbands to somewhat limit the control these men would have over their property. A husband could hire out his wife's services—such as needlework or hair dressing—to other people. Common law also made a husband responsible for his wife's behavior. He could beat her if she misbehaved, as long as it was “moderate punishment” (as defined by other men). When domestic violence occurred, absolute divorces were rarely granted, so some women's best option was to run away. Women had no more legal right to run away than slaves or servants. When they did, husbands might publish ads in the newspaper to find them. Runaway wife ads sometimes equalled the number of fugitive slave ads in some southern colonies. These women often had skills and opportunities to support themselves and considered it their right to abandon their husbands.

Upper-class women had less freedom to escape. If they ran away, they faced the disgrace of being “unladylike” in the eyes of their society. Popular among wealthy women were ladies' books, written by ministers, encouraging complete submission and obedience to husbands, and telling young girls never to show interest in men or admit they were in love.

Place **CD Track 1** to hear the song “When I Was Single.”

Discussion Question: Why do you think the woman in the song “When I Was Single” felt the way she did?

Colonial Trade

Trade between the colonies grew slowly, since travel routes had to be hacked into the wilderness and ships and ports established. But once this had been accomplished, colonial merchants helped break down barriers between the colonies. Greater unity and understanding developed between the isolated communities as merchants made business deals and competed with one another.

Small ships that wove in and out of eastern seaports exchanged not only goods but ideas as well. Like today's telephone, ships and their traders carried the news. Southern colonies, raising mostly staple crops of cotton and tobacco, depended on the middle colonies for food. New York flour showed up in Charleston where Dutch merchants used it like a credit card to buy rice for Europeans. As roads improved, taverns such as this one marked the main roads. Innkeepers could make large profits when they provided dinner and beds for merchants planning shipments of tea. Later, Patriots would use these same taverns for their political meetings.

Retail shops developed to distribute goods from other colonies and from abroad. Colonists in big cities began to see advertisements in newspapers for "Beautifying Wash," candles, and china. People started shopping for pleasure and not just for necessity.

Discussion Question: How did trade in the colonies develop?

Life on the Small Farm

Most of the colonists depended on farming for their survival. Life for them was constant work. A farming family ate, wore, and lived in what it grew and made. The family cleared the land, built the house and barn, and made their own clothes, tables, beds, chairs, and yokes and harnesses for the oxen. The American farmer was known as a “jack-of-all-trades”—a person who could perform any occupation.

Corn, wheat, tobacco, and barley were just some of the crops farmers raised. Cattle grazed in the pasture and hogs roamed the woods until killing time in November. What the family did not eat or use for itself, it brought to town to trade or sell. Shipping goods was expensive and only for larger farms.

The farmer’s tools were very basic, only slightly better than what the Native Americans had, and were made at home with whatever wood was available. Plows were scarce, and the farmer lucky enough to have one usually did the plowing for his neighbors. New England farmers struggled with boulder-filled fields and early frosts, while southern farmers dealt with diseases of the swamp-like climate.

Generally, the colonists were wasteful farmers. They cleared forests and mined the soil. Without trees the topsoil washed with the rains into streams and harbors. Most coastal land had worn out 30 years before the Revolution. When this happened, farmers moved on to fresh land, for at that time, the amount of “free” land seemed limitless.

Discussion Question: What was life like on a colonial small farm?

Leisure

Many settlers left behind in Europe a rich heritage of folk customs and holidays. But gradually the colonists created their own forms of recreation, or “frolics,” as people called them. Most of these events combined work with pleasure, since there was always much work to be done. And the more hands there were to help, the better. At “husking bees,” people talked about crops, weather, gossip, and recipes while they husked corn. A “house raising” or “barn raising” brought neighbors out to help build a family’s home or barn. Such workdays ended with feasting and dancing. Many rituals involved politics as well. Town meetings or court days were times not only to do business but also to drink and socialize while finding out who was getting married or who was suing whom.

Fairs were a great social event. Families could trade their farm goods, buy small luxuries, and compete in athletic, dancing, and music competitions. Catching a greased pig or climbing a greased pole were popular and messy events. Bonfires were lit and everyone drank a lot of liquor. Wealthier people held balls, in preparation for which the “right people” practiced their minuets and jigs for several weeks.

When the weather was good, the three popular spectator sports were horse racing, rooster fighting, and bull baiting. Bets were laid as the upper class raced their horses, dogs were set on bulls, and roosters were set on each other. In the winter, southern colonists stayed in the house for dancing and card playing, while northerners enjoyed these activities as well as ice skating, sledding, and sleighing. Children worked hard but found time to play familiar games such as tag, marbles, hopscotch, and cat’s cradle. Dolls, known then as “puppets” or “babies,” might be made of corn cobs, which children also used to make miniature houses.

Discussion Question: What kinds of leisure activities did colonists enjoy?

Life on the Frontier

No sooner had townships been established on the Atlantic coastal plain than colonists were making a new start west—to Ohio, Mississippi, and the St. Lawrence and Great Lakes triangle area. “If hell lay to the West,” ran a proverb of the time, “Americans would cross heaven to reach it.” Until the early 1700’s the majority of colonists stayed and farmed to the east of the Appalachian Mountains. But a new wave of German, Scottish, Irish, and Jewish immigrants found the seaboard lands crowded and headed for the mountain valleys of Pennsylvania and the Ohio, Mississippi, and Virginia river valleys.

On the frontier people found a life of hardship but also a life of freedom as they began their farms and homesteads. The competition of older communities, noises of neighborhoods, community fights, and pressure to conform did not exist in the wilderness. People established their own traditions and found that everyone seemed to be on a common social level. Frontier people were known for their confidence and independence, which could be a completely new experience for the immigrants whose lives had been harsh and degrading in Europe.

The gun was the settler’s most important tool on the frontier. It meant economic survival to the first settlers who hunted and traded furs and meat. It also meant protection from “varmints” such as wolves, bears, and wildcats. As people began to stay and establish farms, it was not unusual for a farmer to kill a dozen rattlers and copperheads while clearing a small field. To clear the land of animals, creatures of every kind were herded into small valleys and slaughtered. Because of these massacres and land takeovers, frontier people earned the hatred of Native Americans. The colonists built forts for protection against them and the French.

Life was simple without the few luxuries townspeople had. People relied on whatever the land could give them, and sometimes carried their most important possessions on their bodies, such as food and bullets. They entertained themselves with athletic contests, fights, and weddings that lasted for days. The few neighbors a person could find were absolutely necessary for birthing babies, building houses, or providing companionship. Law and order often did not exist in any form except a group of people who were willing to “sweat” a confession out of a suspect and publicly whip the person. The frontier attracted everyone, from murderers and thieves who failed to fit into old communities to religious and social reformers who wanted to experiment in creating new societies.

Discussion Question: How did life on the frontier differ from life in colonial towns?

Death and Funerals

Since disease raged in the early years of the colonies, death was commonplace. If children did not die from measles or diphtheria, smallpox or typhoid might catch them later as adults. By 1775 people's average life expectancy rate, as determined in Massachusetts, might have been about 34 years for a man and 36 years for a woman.

Funerals were social as well as solemn events. Friends and family could reunite for feasting and drinking. Some families saw funerals as a chance to display their wealth as well as grief. Costly gifts such as scarves, gloves, and gold rings were passed out to all guests, no matter what the family's finances were. A New England funeral involved a brief ceremony with the minister and then great festivities. Boston eventually prohibited funerals on Sundays because the children and servants following the coffin through the streets made too much noise on the Sabbath Day. Graves appeared on family land, marked with plain stone slabs, until cemeteries were established near meetinghouses. There elaborately carved stone markers popped up, often overgrown with weeds. In the south whole families were buried in gardens and orchards. Trees marked the burial sites. Poorer families might go into debt to finance a feast and a sermon by a minister.

Discussion Question: What were funerals like in colonial America?

Families

Families tended to be large in the colonial period. With all the work to be done, there were never enough hands, so a large family was an asset. Together a family could produce the equivalent of many of our retail stores today. Men and women often worked side by side, until customs changed to give men the work in the fields, barns, and stores, while women supervised the food preparation and the children. High demands were placed on children to behave and contribute to the family's survival. They did whatever smaller chores were necessary, from feeding livestock to turning the roast over the fire. Still adjusting to the new land, colonists sometimes found it hard to establish stable families. Life was full of emotional strains from the unfamiliar climate, wilderness, and new patterns of life to be established. Early homes were crowded and sometimes quite isolated from the community.

In Europe communities were closer and organized by traditions. In the wilderness of America, however, colonists had to rely on large families. "Family" came to mean all blood relations in the neighborhood. And "neighborhood" meant any area reachable by horseback or canoe within a day or a 50-mile radius. A typical family clan was not always one mother, one father and children, but more of a mixed bag: parents and stepparents, guardians, children, stepchildren, and orphans living in the same house. Illness and early death demanded that people take in the sick or the orphaned.

Discussion Question: What difficulties did colonial families face?

Communities

The first colonial towns centered around groups of settlers from similar countries, religious groups, or backgrounds. Colonial governments began granting free land to these immigrant groups with the promise that they would farm the land and provide for public areas. In the northern colonies, local governments assigned town lots to heads of families. Outlying or central lands became common grazing lands for citizens' cattle or public areas for markets and parks. Sometimes families received private lands for farming and grazing. Colonists found many advantages to living in a township: common defense against the Native Americans, nearby schools and churches, and a local government to settle issues. Later on, the spread toward the frontier weakened communities somewhat, as people left their land and churches for a new start.

In the southern colonies large plantations were often isolated and so became self-contained communities. There, with large workforces of indentured servants and slaves, planters produced their own food, raised horses, and ran craft shops. These areas were generally out of touch with one another until the Revolution united them.

Discussion Question: What kinds of communities existed in the American colonies?

Class Differences

Many immigrants to the colonies were middle-class citizens, and many started out as indentured servants. In America wealth did not always mean as much as it did back in Europe, since new starts were available for many people in the colonies. In the north, the son of an indentured servant could become a prominent preacher. The Adams family was insignificant in the 1600's, but by 1775 John Adams had graduated from Harvard as a lawyer and had made it into politics. But people still found ways to preserve old traditions and prejudices; they used money, instead of blood or heritage, to make distinctions between one another.

In the southern colonies a few people gained control of thousands of acres and rich estates. They and their grandchildren dominated the social and political life of the region, though they were outnumbered by less wealthy farmers. African Americans were slaves and were considered a threat if freed. Native Americans were never well accepted and usually stayed on the frontiers of colonial settlements. People on the frontier often mistrusted townspeople in the original colonies, calling them "swindlers." Townspeople might lump frontier people together with the Native Americans as "savages." In the northern colonies Native and African Americans might attempt to join white communities but usually were only accepted as second-class citizens.

The "gentry," as richer people were known, came together throughout the colonies. Their money gave them opportunities for college educations, marriages to prominent people, and vacation trips. Clothes distinguished the "gentleman" and "colonel" from the "goodman," or farmer. Gold and silver lace, buttons, boots, and wigs displayed wealth. But visitors to America saw that if the local drunk could share a bet at the horse races with the local justice of the peace, then society was much more open among white people there than it had ever been in Europe.

Discussion Question: What were the different social and economic classes in colonial America?

Literacy and Education

School wasn't guaranteed to any colonial child, but a colonist had a better chance of getting an education if she or he lived in a large town where people could read and enough parents wanted schooling for their children. The northern colonies organized schools in which parents paid the teachers in food or animal skins, until later the towns organized lotteries and granted money. In the southern colonies, however, it was more difficult since houses and plantations were not always very close to one another. A few neighbors might hire a teacher to instruct their children in a shabby building on an exhausted tobacco field. George Washington got his education in one of these "old-field" schools and travelled over 10 miles on foot or by horse to get to it. Wealthy families might send their children to the local minister or to a relative who could read. Not until after the Revolution did "free" public schools begin, when town taxes paid for the schools in some northeastern colonies.

School was a gloomy, one-room house with benches or logs where you sat and shouted out your spelling words to the schoolmaster and copied sums and problems from his one arithmetic book. There were no blackboards, maps, globes, or pencils. You wrote in ink on tree bark. You learned the alphabet, syllables, and prayers from one book, the New England Primer, which was so religious it was known as the "Little Bible of New England." If you misbehaved, you might be whipped, gagged, pinched, or yoked to another student. And "you" were probably a boy, since girls were strongly encouraged to stay at home.

The literacy rate of colonists is hard to determine because polls were not available, and "literacy" might mean you could read a bit of the Bible but not write. Many more people could read than write. In some colonies, reading skills were almost universal for both males and females. Fewer people could write their names in the south than in the north by 1700: 90 percent of men and 40 percent of women in New England, as compared to 55 percent of men and 25 percent of women in Virginia.

Discussion Question: How was education in colonial America different than it is today?

Courtship and Gender Relations

Marriages tended to be business arrangements between parents and couples. Practical considerations, such as wealth and property, outweighed passion and romance. But romance still flourished. Couples could court at husking bees, fairs, and dances. Valentines and letters carried messages of love and marriage proposals.

Middle- and lower-class couples often waited until one of them had acquired enough money or property to establish an independent household. Wealthy families gave a son or daughter a share of the family fortune when he or she married. Widows and widowers, especially those with property, were expected to find a spouse immediately and continue contributing to the colonial economy. Single life was difficult anyway without a person who could share the work. It was common to marry within weeks of a spouse's funeral. The majority of people who survived to age 50 were married at least twice. It wasn't unusual to have five husbands or wives in a lifetime.

Girls might marry as early as age 13. At 25, being single was almost disgraceful for females, since many colonial religions insisted that a woman's only purpose in life was to marry and raise children. Girls and boys were thus raised and treated as very different creatures. Females were viewed as the "weaker vessels," less able to learn in school and more fit for raising children and keeping a home. Little girls were trained in household duties such as spinning, milking, and washing. They made soap and bonnets and cared for their brothers and sisters. To achieve an erect posture, girls were strapped to backboards and sat in harnesses. Males were expected to provide the family income and physical strength. They went to school to learn the numbers that told them how much the local merchant owed the family for the goods it produced. At home they followed their fathers in the seasons of planting, tending, and harvesting, and they hunted and fed the livestock. In the winter women would continue their daily routines, while men and boys prepared for the next season at a more leisurely pace, repairing fences and hauling in wood as needed.

In early colonial settlements men and women worked side by side in the fields and barns. As trade and farming technology developed, requiring less hands to work and sending farmers out to buy their clothes and tools, women retreated to the home. Their share in the family's economic production declined. Relations between the sexes were more equal when there was more work to be done.

Discussion Question: How were courtship and gender relations similar to and different from what they are today?

Food

Food in the colonies was abundant but difficult to prepare and not necessarily very interesting once it was done. One might eat the same dishes for days on end. With the lack of knowledge about healthful eating, disease, and food preparation, early Americans were often lean and scrawny like the picture of Uncle Sam. Very few were overweight.

With the whole family joining in the preparation process, the colonial mother generally supervised all the grinding, hewing, and churning. A large iron stewpot boiled scraps of meat and vegetables constantly in the huge fireplace, since the food would otherwise spoil and fires were difficult to rekindle without matches. All skillets and pots had long handles and legs so a person could remove the utensil from the fire without getting burned. Because refrigerators did not exist, meat such as venison (deer), turkey, pork, and beef was salted, pickled, or smoked if not roasted from a spit or string. Root vegetables were buried under sand or dirt in the cellar, while fruit was usually dried by thread hung from the kitchen rafters.

Wealthier colonists had servants prepare their food and, as trade developed, had luxury foods brought to their tables. Coffee, tea, raisins, lemons, and wine were delicacies. The less wealthy never experienced these foods and used relishes, molasses, honey, or preserved watermelon rind to spice up a meal.

Corn was an extremely important food to every colonist. It could be roasted or shelled and boiled into a coarse meal. Travellers carried kernels with them for nourishment, since it was reported that each Pilgrim had survived on five kernels a day during famine. Milk, too, became an important food as cattle increased. A typical meal might be milk and "hasty pudding," made from corn meal. For a long time colonists preferred drinking ale, beer, wine, and whiskey to water. Once they discovered that New World water was clean and healthful, they gradually adopted it.

Discussion Question: What was the diet of colonists like?

Importance of the Church

The colonial church or meetinghouse was not only a place for religious practice but was for a long time the only place to socialize, advertise, and celebrate major events in colonial lives. Colonial families were summoned early to the mandatory services on the Sabbath Day by drums, conch shells, or bells. In some churches the Seating Committee arranged and sometimes separated people (even within families) by social class and sex. Mothers might sit with daughters while their husbands sat on the other side of the church. Little boys sat in carefully watched groups. Native Americans and African slaves converted to Christianity would sit in the loft near the ceiling. Someone wrote about this practice of putting the wealthiest and oldest members of the congregation in the best seats:

In the goodly house of worship,
Where in order due and fit,
As by public vote directed,
Classed and ranked the people sit.

Ministers' sermons in northeastern colonies could last two to three hours, and prayers were only a bit shorter. In the south the Anglican Book of Common Prayer limited the sermon to 20 minutes. People came early to do business, read ads, and discuss tobacco and livestock prices. On church walls were posted notices of town meetings, cattle sales, and marriages. After a church service, families in New England might head to the "noon" or "Sabba-day" house, where bread and doughnuts could be eaten, adults could talk, and children had sermons read to them. In the south families and couples might take strolls around the church.

Discussion Question: In what ways was the church important to colonists?

Religious Rituals

Here Virginia Dare, the first English child to be born in America, is baptized. Religious rituals were extremely important to the colonists. The Bible filled colonial days. A family read the Bible over and over, front to back. It was usually one of the few books a household had. The Bible not only instructed a colonist about religion or reading but was an important symbol: the Pilgrims had suffered tremendous ordeals to be able to read their precious holy book on the new continent.

Sundays, also known as Sabbath Days, were a serious affair. In many colonies one could not jump, fish, ride, or dance on the Sabbath. A church official might be coming by to see that a family had made it to church and had behaved while they was there. New York's City Hall Park held a cage to confine boys who had misbehaved on the Sabbath. Though Puritans tended to be the strictest, all religions across the colonies observed the Sabbath Day as a day free from work and full of prayer. As harsh as it sounds, church service broke the routine of the week and meant much to the hard-working colonists.

Discussion Question: What kinds of religious rituals did colonists observe?